OPINION

BY MUNA KHAN

What fire takes

MY mother drove a hard bargain. She did so by disarming her opponent — usually a shopkeeper hellbent on his prices. She worked on making a connection with the person. I watched her do this across markets wherever we lived, sometimes using sign language to bargain or sharing a joke that led to prices coming down.

We both preferred markets over malls, not that we had malls when she died in 1996. Our favourite was Bohri Bazaar but we also went to Gul Plaza for household items because back then, we went to Saddar for everything. Gul Plaza's main attraction then was the crockery but you could also get random kitsch items, things you don't need. Think Temu finds but in a shop format.

Everything has shifted to this side of the bridge but I returned to Gul Plaza when I was teaching at IBA because of the proximity. You could still buy almost everything household-related, but it had grown to house things like luggage, even puzzles. There was one particular shop that sold vintage Corning Ware (a brand of bakeware) and I was always on the fence about buying them, worried about the lead in the painted designs. The shopkeeper was well-versed in how glass ceramics worked, how heat-resistant the dishes were.

The irony shouldn't be lost on anyone. All that expertise about heat resistance, and yet none of it mattered against a fire like this.

Ten days later, I'm thinking of him. His shop couldn't have survived. There's another seller I bought from often, discovered through Instagram. A few voice notes, online payment, delivery; it was effortless, though never quite the same as being there. He's safe, some inventory lost, but working online now, grateful for the social media support that lets him breathe, he said.

When a building burns, we witness a peculiar violence against time itself. Fire doesn't merely consume goods and furniture etc; it severs the threads that connect us to our past selves, to the people we've loved, and to the futures we imagined unfolding here.

A building is not just concrete; it is also a vessel of layered experience. At Gul Plaza, we started as strangers, then became regulars, then friends, then part of each other's stories. A building is thus an anchor in a vast web of human connection. The fire didn't destroy things; it ruptured that continuity of experience.

There's something truly devastating about this. We understand ourselves partly through our relationship to a place and the things within it. To lose it is to lose an anchor for memory itself. I can remember what happened at Gul Plaza with my mother but I can no longer stand in the actual space where it occurred.

These are not just buildings; they are vessels for the moments we won't get back; the past becomes harder to retrieve. In my case, I've lost another memory associated with my mother. Because she died so unexpectedly and quite young, I've sort of grown up in these markets and learned to manage life in them. In many ways, these shopkeepers have been my teachers — "buy this pan for frying" advised one uncle, "buy this material for sari petticoats" said another.

The future also dies in flames — not the future of new buildings, but the specific future that belonged to Gul Plaza. The shops that would have been taken over by grandchildren not yet born are lost. Fire also kills these particular possibilities. The thing is: fire doesn't understand memory or the significance of a building. The things that matter most burn just as easily as the things that don't matter at all.

Yet there's also something revealing in what survives. Once again we're seeing how ordinary Karachi denizens make ordinary things meaningful by caring about them. Yes, Gul Plaza fell to ash, but the resolve of those who built it has not.

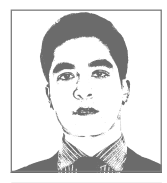
> A building is more than concrete; it is a vessel of layered experience.

How many times must Karachiites rebuild what incompetence burns down? We will do it because we know what stands behind these burned buildings — the will to endure, to rebuild, to continue. Thankfully, that has not been touched by flames.

It takes time for a place to become truly *ours*, and the Gul Plaza fire reset that clock to zero. What comes next will be built by us but it will rise in the shadow of a truth we have long known, especially in Karachi: no one protects us. The systems meant to prevent such loss are hollow. When they speak of inquiries, of compensating families, of resilience, of rebuilding, we know what they're not saying — this was preventable, that our loss was their failure, that concrete can be replaced but trust, once burned, takes generations to restore. And we have been burned plenty.

The clock resets for the building. Our faith in government, however, is stuck at zero. ■

The writer was an instructor of journalism.
X: @LedeingLady



BY ASAD-UL-MULK

Lost purposes

ACROSS the world, when the court exercises civil jurisdiction, the trial judge occupies a unique place in the judicial hierarchy. He witnesses the trial unfold before his very eyes, unlike an appeal or revisional court judge. He is judge of the quality and quantity of the evidence, as well as the law.

In Pakistan, amongst the judicial functions unique to trial court judges is their duty to scrutinise plaints, rule on issues of jurisdiction and maintainability, frame issues, record evidence, issue rulings (on the relevance, admissibility and exclusion of evidence, etc), assess the credibility of witnesses, protect witnesses from harassment and otherwise regulate the order of trial.

The law ordains that the judgement of trial judges, with respect to the quality and quantity of the evidence, is deferred to by appellate court judges. While a civil appeal is broad in scope, a civil revision is narrow, and a civil petition for leave to appeal even narrower, and this is reflected in the language of Section 96 and 115 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 (CPC), and Article 185 of the Constitution, respectively.

In the US, Federal Rule 52 (a) of Civil Procedure provides that: findings of fact made by a trial court shall not be set aside by an appellate court unless found to be "clearly erroneous". In 'United States vs Gypsum' (1948) the US supreme court ruled that an appellate court should not disturb the findings of facts made by the trial court unless, upon examination of the entire record, the appellate court is "left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed".

This exalted position of the trial judge exists in law because of his proximity to the evidentiary process and institutional advantage. The proximity and institutional advantage cannot be replicated, not even by the highest court in the land, hence, in 'Brown vs Allen' (1953), Justice Robert H. Jackson, in his concurring opinion for the US supreme court, famously wrote, "We are not final because we are infallible, but we are infallible only because we are final".

Alas, the trial judge in Pakistan is not as proximate to the trial as the law envisages or the judiciary pretends. A visit to a civil court often gives rise not to a spectacle where the trial judge is conducting the trial, but a spectacle where the trial judge is leaning back, and simultaneously a series of trials are underway. Evidence is hardly ever recorded by the trial judge, and invariably by the parties themselves, through their lawyers. Plaints are almost never scrutinised by the trial judge, who retrenches in the name of preserving the 'adversarial nature' of proceedings, notwithstanding enabling amendments in the law, such as in Section 26 of the CPC, which propel the issue of jurisdiction to the forefront, and envisage a more participatory and inquisitorial role for the trial judge.

The demeanour of witnesses is never assessed, even though a combined reading of the CPC and the Qanun-i-Shahadat Order, 1984 (QSO), empowers a judge to assess demeanour, an important consideration in evaluating the credibility and weight to attach to a testimony. Historians say that in the 1960 US presidential debates, those who heard the debates over radio thought Richard Nixon had won, whereas those who watched them on television thought John F. Kennedy had won. The difference arose because of the ability to adjudge demeanour on television. While Nixon did fine in the transcripts and over audio, on television Kennedy exuded confidence, composure and radiated a more positive body language.

> Most trial judges in Pakistan don't even see a trial through.

Order XVIII, Rule 12 of the CPC categorically states that "The court may record such remarks as it thinks material respecting the demeanour of any witness while under examination". Conversely, Section 161 of the QSO empowers the trial judge to ask any question "in any form, at any time, of any witness, or of the parties about any fact relevant or irrelevant; and may order the production of any document or thing".

Despite such explicit authorisation, I am yet to come across a case where a trial judge has invoked his statutory powers in such an inquisitorial manner.

In fact, most trial judges don't even see a trial through as trials take years to complete, whereas a trial judge is transferred in a year or two of posting, aggravating the lack of case management in Pakistan.

With the trial judge often unable to see the trial through, and constrained by longstanding customs and practices, though not the law, which militate against an inquisitorial and participatory approach, the purpose behind laws according deference to the judgement of the trial judge on the quality and quantity of evidence is woefully lost. ■

The writer is a practising barrister.
asadulmulk@legalparameter.com

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Formidable nation

HYDERABAD: Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared here today [Jan 24] that days are not far off when Pakistan would be a forceful and formidable nation so strong that none would be able to cast an evil eye on her. He said Pakistan was bound to be the strongest nation in this Sub-continent. Winding up the … Hyderabad Division PPP workers convention … Mr Bhutto said Pakistan was faced with an uphill task of nation building which needed ceaseless struggle and firm faith in its destiny. … Mr Bhutto … assured workers of his party that PPP would never go back on its commitments with the people but would adhere to the very letter and spirit of its manifesto. … He said … "we are wedded to the object of emancipation of the fallen and downtrodden section of our society". — Staff correspondent

[Meanwhile, as reported from Rawalpindi,] the alien names of all cities and towns in Pakistan will be … substituted by Pakistani names befitting national pride and honour. This was announced here today [Jan 24] by Federal Minister for Provincial Coordination, Mr Abdul Hafeez Pirzada, at a Press briefing while explaining the decisions taken at the Provincial Coordination Committee.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Down with pneumonia

LONDON: Mr Ernest Bevin, stricken with pneumonia … is "holding his own", his doctors said this afternoon [Jan 24]. Sir Alexander McCall, a leading … physician was called in to attend Bevin at his home where he is confined since yesterday when he first became ill with influenza. Bevin who is 69 has been seriously ill for months… . Prime Minister Clement Attlee … took over active direction of foreign affairs during crucial negotiations concerning Communist-China. — News agencies

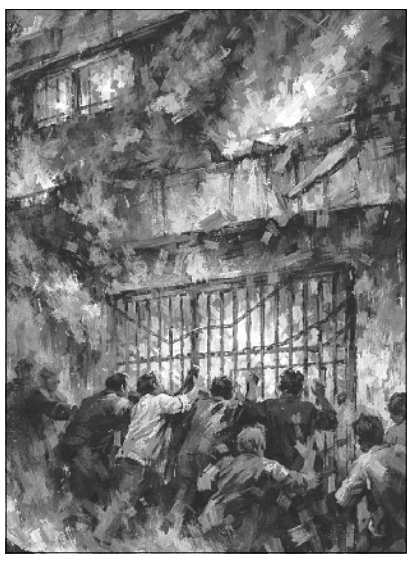
[As reported by news agencies in Kalimpong,] the Communists invaders slowly moving up from Chinese Turkistan have reached Gartok capital of western Tibet… . Gartok, the biggest wool centre in that part of Tibet, is 150 air miles on the other side of the great Himalaya from Almora in Uttar Pradesh.

[As per news agencies in Washington,] a resolution to withdraw United States membership from the United Nations has been introduced in the United States House of Representatives by Mr J.E. Rankin, Democrat of Mississippi. Mr Rankin told the House … that the United Nations had been one of "the greatest failures in the history of all mankind".

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@dawn.com

Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.



When fire speaks, it tells the harsh truth

THE Gul Plaza fire was more than just a tragic headline. It was a stark reminder of how quickly life can change when fire meets poor preparation. Behind the smoke, the flames and the sirens lies a lesson we cannot ignore. Fire does not warn in words. It warns in signs we often overlook — blocked exits, overcrowded shops, flammable decorations, silent alarms and a lack of training. When we ignore these warnings, fire speaks loudly, and its language is destruction.

Portable fire extinguishers are naturally not designed to fight large fires. They are meant for very small, early-stage flames. In markets and plazas where artificial flowers, plastics, fabrics and decorations are stored in large quantities, a fire can get out of control within minutes. Expecting a handheld extinguisher to save lives in such conditions is unrealistic.

The Gul Plaza fire, as per early reports, started in a ground-floor shop selling artificial decorations. This made the situation even more dangerous. Fires on the ground floor can quickly block escape routes while thick, poisonous smoke rises to trap people on the upper floors. In many fires, smoke — not the flames — claims lives.

There has been talk of 'multiple exits' and 'ventilation', but safety is not about numbers or claims. An exit filled with smoke, locked doors, poor lighting or stored goods is not an exit; it is a trap. Unplanned ventilation can also feed the flames and spread smoke faster, making matters worse.

What truly saves lives is preparation. Early fire detection systems, automatic sprinklers, clear escape routes and strong building management form the backbone of fire safety. Equally important is training. Pakistan Civil Defence plays a critical role here. Trained personnel can identify risks before a fire starts, guide people calmly during emergencies, and coordinate effectively with fire brigades and rescue teams. Untrained individuals, by contrast, panic, make mistakes, and unintentionally put others in danger.

Fire safety is not the responsibility of the relevant authorities alone. Building-owners must ensure safe designs and functioning systems. Shopkeepers need to control combustible materials and keep exits clear. The public must follow instructions and avoid risky behaviour. Most importantly, frequent and regular drills and trainings must become a habit, not an afterthought.

The Gul Plaza fire should not fade from memory. It must remain a lesson written in smoke and loss. Fire does not judge intentions or explanations. It only tests whether or not we are prepared.

If we listen carefully, the fire is telling us something quite simple, but powerful: prevention, training and preparedness save lives. Everything else is mere regret.

Mudassar Nawaz
Assistant Director
Directorate-General Civil Defence
Islamabad

PIA accountability

PAKISTAN International Airlines (PIA) was established by rebranding and nationalising Orient Airways by the government in 1955. Over the years, PIA grew to become one of the major airlines in Asia, known for its hospitality, reliability and innovation. PIA's golden age was under its early leadership, the visionary Air Marshal Nur Khan (1959-65).

He revolutionised PIA through bold marketing, modern jets, pioneering routes and exceptional service, making it a source of national pride. PIA even helped establish other airlines in the region before the sustained decline began in the mid-1970s due to politicisation, corruption and mismanagement, a trend that worsened over the following decades.

The sale of PIA represents a turning point in the airline's history, sparking debates about the future of aviation in Pakistan and the importance of preserving a heritage.

It is imperative that we just do not shy away from holding accountable all those individuals whose decisions and actions led to this unfortunate outcome. The public has a right to know how a national asset was brought to its knees. A clear, official identification of those responsible, across political administrations, managements and boards, is essential to restore trust in public institutions.

Naming and shaming these individuals is not about seeking revenge, but about ensuring that justice is served, and that such a grave error is not repeated. It is a call for transparency, accountability and responsibility in the face of adversity.

The sale of PIA, while perhaps a necessary step to stem bleeding public funds, must not be the end of the story. Allowing the era of loss to pass without a rigorous accounting would be a grave injustice to the people and a guarantee that the cycle will reappear elsewhere.

True reform requires not just punishing the wrongdoers of the past, but fixing the governance, oversight and professional culture that enabled them.

The campaign for accountability is vital for Pakistan's economic future and the integrity of its public institutions.

Air-Cdre (retd) M. Khalid Kamal
Islamabad

Horse in hospital

TALKING about the unprovoked attack by the United States against Venezuela to topple its democratically-elected government, American comedian/actor John Mulaney recently compared the Donald Trump presidency to a horse that has broken loose inside a hospital.

"It has never happened before. No one knows what the horse is going to do next, least of all the horse. He has never been in a hospital. He is as confused as you are," he quipped.

It is a funny analogy, but legitimately worrying. Trump is unstable, vengefully angry, self-centred, self-serving, and willing to take the world for a most brutal spin just for the sake of making his way into the historical 'greatness' books.

On Nov 6, 2024, Trump had publicly stated: "Many people have told me that God spared my life (from two assassination attempts) for a reason. And that reason was to save our country and to restore America to greatness."

Then again, Germany's Adolf Hitler had also escaped assassination attempts, and may have also mused that something Divine or mystical had spared his life. If anything, Trump, like Hitler, is a great evil unleashed onto a largely powerless world.

Frank Sterle Jr
White Rock, Canada

▶ **A STRANGE NOTICE:** One of my relatives recently received a gas bill that carries an unbelievable notice, warning that in the future, gas supplies would be charged according to the customer's income. Really? I am unable to understand since when and under what authority the gas company has assumed the role of an income tax officer. Will the Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) officials enlighten the consumers on the matter?
Shameem Ahmad
Karachi

▶ **TRAGIC ACCIDENT:** My relatives residing in Quetta experienced a tragic incident recently when they forgot to switch off the gas connection before going to bed. When they woke up in the morning and tried to ignite the heater, a massive explosion occurred. The blast completely destroyed the house in the blink of an eye. All those who were in the house at the time sustained injuries to varying degrees, while the breadwinner of the family was severely injured and had to be hospitalised. People should be careful while dealing with heaters and geysers. The Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL) should devise a proper schedule for gas loadshedding to prevent such accidents.
Muhammad Jawad
Quetta

▶ **GIZRI TRAFFIC CHAOS:** Motorists, including rickshaws and bikers, blatantly drive on the wrong way under the Gizri flyover, creating massive traffic blockages and bringing the entire flow to a standstill. Citizens remain helpless in the face of this worsening chaos. What is even more disappointing is the complete absence of traffic police personnel at this critical point to prevent such violations. It appears as if this area has been abandoned by the authorities altogether. The e-challan is a modern initiative, but it can only be effective if its active on-ground enforcement is ensured. To curb this frequent traffic gridlock in Gizri area, immediate deployment of traffic police under the flyover and strict action against wrong-side violators are essential steps to restore smooth traffic movement as well as public confidence in the system.
Mumraiz Khan
Karachi

Basant can still be a safe affair

THIS is with reference to the report 'Police submit report on Basant security plan in LHC' (Jan 17), according to which the Lahore High Court (LHC) was briefed in detail about the security plan for the upcoming three-day Basant festival, which will be celebrated in Lahore from Feb 6, following the passage of the Punjab Regulation of Kite Flying Bill, 2025, that ended a suspension of the festival after almost two decades.

Soon, the skies in the Punjab capital would be filled with fluttering kites. However, we must remember why the festival was banned in the first place. It was because people had lost their lives, some had their throats slit, while others, including children, had fallen from rooftops while chasing kites. One hopes that the return of the festival will be a more guarded affair.

Although kite flying has been banned across Punjab since 2007, many have continued over the years to ignore the ban. This lack of responsibility and disregard for law resulted in the deaths of both minors and adults. Kite strings are extremely thin, sharp and almost invisible. It is often noticed by the human eye when it is already too late. A few years ago, I watched a video of a man on his motorcycle who suddenly stopped, unaware of what had happened. Only a few seconds later, blood came gushing out of his neck, and he died on the spot.

Even though an age-based limit has been set under the new regulations, chances are that all such regulations might not be strictly enforced. After all, we do see underage children riding

motorbikes and driving cars in our streets despite there being a law against such a practice. The only effective measures to prevent any casualty is to ensure that people fly kites in open spaces, motorcyclists wear helmets, and Basant is celebrated on a single day so that youngsters may not feel encouraged to engage in 'running' contests over multiple days.

Zahra Imtiaz
Hafizabad

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
Email: dawnombudsman@gmail.com